



Request for Information – Response
October 16, 2020

TO: Texas House Committee on Public Health
PublicHealth@house.texas.gov

FROM: Lee Johnson, MPA
Deputy Director, Texas Council of Community Centers
8140 N Mopac
Westpark Building 3, Ste. 240
Austin, Texas 78759

RE: Request for Information (RFI) Response for Interim Charge 1 – Due October 16th

Related to Rural Health

SB 633, relating to an initiative to increase the capacity of local mental health authorities to provide access to mental health services in certain counties.

The Texas Council represents the 39 Community Mental Health and Intellectual Disability Centers (Centers) throughout Texas statutorily authorized to coordinate, provide, and manage community-based services, as alternatives to institutional care, for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), serious mental illness, and substance addictions. In many areas of the state Centers are known as Local Mental Health Authorities (LMHAs) and Local IDD Authorities (LIDDAs).

As directed by SB 633, the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC), Local Mental Health Authorities (LMHAs), and other stakeholders have worked throughout the interim to develop a plan for rural Texas that focuses on reducing:

- (1) the cost to local governments of providing services to persons experiencing a mental health crisis;
- (2) the transportation of persons served by an authority in the local mental health authority group to mental health facilities;
- (3) the incarceration of persons with mental illness in county jails that are located in an areas served by an authority in the local mental health authority group; and
- (4) the number of hospital emergency room visits by persons with mental illness at hospitals located in an area served by an authority in the local mental health authority group.

HHSC is required to produce and publish the report by December 1, 2020.

Immediately following the close of the 86th Legislature, HHSC initiated preliminary meetings with stakeholders to set the stage for implementing the directives contained in SB 633, identified the thirty

(30) LMHAs/LBHAs that serve at least one county of 250,000 or less and established regional groups based on the seven (7) state hospital catchment areas for adults. The seven regions served as the basis for the regional planning process. In launching the initiative, HHSC named the SB 633 initiative “All Texas Access” to reflect intent to ensure Texans in both urban and rural areas have access to mental health services at the right time and right place.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuing restrictions on in-person gatherings, and the extraordinary, successful efforts of the public mental health system to maintain access to care by transitioning to remote service delivery, stakeholders remained actively engaged in the SB 633 planning process and HHSC continued to support the regional plan development. As such, HHSC is expected to publish the final report by the legislatively mandated December 1, 2020 due date.

The Texas Council of Community Centers supported SB 633 throughout the legislative process, making note of numerous collaborations underway throughout the public mental health system, and acknowledging the need to increase access to mental health services in rural Texas. As anticipated, the draft regional plans reflect common challenges across rural Texas, including transportation, workforce shortages, and limited access to both alternatives to hospitalization and inpatient psychiatric care, as well as the need to build on existing relationships with law enforcement and jail diversion initiatives, such as Mental Health Deputy Programs.

Additionally, the final report is now expected to reflect the experience of shifting to remote service delivery due to the pandemic, and the need to retain tele-health and audio-only service delivery flexibilities that have proven to alleviate certain access to care challenges, such as those brought on by workforce shortages and a lack of transportation in rural Texas. This shift in services also raises the need to address broadband width to allow full use of technology in delivering services across all of Texas.

In light of the current pandemic-related economic challenges Texas is experiencing, the 87th legislature will be hard-pressed to invest additional funds in the public mental health system. However, the recommendations in the SB 633 report will deserve serious consideration as it’s now well established: the cost for failing to address mental health needs translates to higher costs to taxpayers.